



Language and Culture in Relation to Intercultural Communication in a Business Context

Nani I. Tiono

Abstract

Intercultural communication; that is, face-to-face communication between people from different cultural background, often has hindrances because of some factors such as the vocabulary, the discourse pattern and the concept of time. Thus, this paper will analyze how these factors can hinder the intercultural communication between the Asians and Americans and what might become the result of the intercultural miscommunication, especially in business contexts.

Keywords: *intercultural communication, discourse pattern, business contexts.*

When people from different cultural backgrounds communicate with each other, there is often misunderstanding. This communication failure might be caused by the lack of common language in each part, since they do not understand each other's languages quite well. They do not know how to encode or to decode the message they receive; thus, they lack discourse understanding. As a result, the receiver does not get the speaker's intended meaning of the message. The intended meaning; that is, what is in the speaker's mind when he is framing his message, is not the same as the interpreted meaning or that which is conveyed to the listener's mind when he receives the message.

Even when language is not a problem, communication failure still happens, especially between two nations because of the lack of knowledge about behavior pattern in each culture. Based on Sapir's theory which is quoted by Cooper (1973), culture is defined as "what a society does and think" (p. 99). Each society has different ways of thinking, expressing ideas and interpreting messages; thus, each society has different cultural background. Furthermore, Cooper explains that culture is divided into "three crude divisions—perception, norms or attitudes and conceptualization" (Cooper, 1973, p.103). Since different nations have different cultures, they also have different perceptions, norms or attitudes and concepts. Thus, I would analyze how the Asians' and Americans' perceptions or concepts of differences can bring about intercultural communication hindrances, especially in business contexts and what might be the impacts of miscommunications.

As what has been mentioned above, the lack of discourse understanding often becomes the principal cause of miscommunication, especially in a communication between different nations with different cultural backgrounds. It is because "language mediates between the individual and the culture" (Corder, 1973, p. 70) so that culture influences the way people use the language. According to Leech (1974), miscommunication and misunderstanding happen because each person has different connotations and associative meanings about something. Besides, a listener would fail to understand what is being said if affective meaning of the message predominates over

conceptual meaning. What is meant by affective meaning is “what is communicated of the feelings and attitudes of the speaker” and conceptual meaning refers to ‘logical , cognitive or denotative content’ (Leech, 1974, p. 26) In other words, if a speaker pays more attention to his own feelings or emotions and attitudes rather than his ability to express logical, cognitive or denotative meaning, miscommunication will happen.

Communication, which can be defined as the sharing of ideas, knowledge and feelings, is always “a cultural / semiotic activity long before it ever becomes linguistic” (James, 1996, p.64). Furthermore, James also explains that to know how texts (including discourse) mean, it is necessary to concentrate on the actual discourse of language as part of social structures and processes. Thus, language and culture are interrelated with each other in the sense that: first, the syntax of a language is related to the concepts; second, the vocabulary of a language is related to the perceptual abilities of those speaking it; third, the vocabulary of a language is related to the norms of the society employing it; fourth, the vocabulary of a language is related to the concepts of those employing it (Cooper, 1973, p. 103). In short, it can be said that language and culture are correlated because the sounds, words, and syntax of a language are related to the ways the speakers of that language experience and behave in it.

One of the problems dealing with language in intercultural communication (face-to-face communication between people from different cultural backgrounds) is the understanding of vocabulary used in a certain language. Each language has its own specific vocabulary which is much influenced by its cultural context; therefore, it is impossible to translate on word-for-word basis from one language to another language. If words are translated in this way, there would be misinterpretation so that communication breaks down. For examples if an advertising slogan is translated into a foreign language, sometimes the translation would make a completely different meaning. The advertising slogan “Come alive with Pepsi” was translated incorrectly into Thai language as “Bring your ancestor back from the dead” (Bovè and Thill, 2000, p. 71). The intended meaning of the slogan is that ‘Pepsi makes you lively’; however, the word ‘alive’ is interpreted as the opposite of ‘dead’ so that the translation is far from what is intended. As a result, the Thai might not want to buy Pepsi at all since they might fear that if they drink it, they would cause the dead spirit to come to earth. In this case, to avoid miscommunication in translating, we have to look at the meaning as a whole, and not to translate word by word. This is true especially when we want to translate slang or idioms. Even when the vocabulary used is not a problem for both the speaker and the listener, miscommunication might still happen because sometimes words would give different meanings or impression when they are used in different cultural contexts. For example, when an American invites an Indonesian for dinner before they have a business transaction, and the American offers some more helpings to the Indonesian, the Indonesian might answer ‘thank you’. However, the Indonesian might get confused when the host passes the food to him. He might put the food back on the table without taking any because in Indonesian culture, the word ‘thank you’ can be used to reject something, whereas in American culture, ‘thank you’ means ‘yes’. This misunderstanding might influence their business transaction since each has a wrong idea on the other.

Another cause of intercultural miscommunication is the different discourse strategies or patterns to organize its presentation. An Indonesian might misinterpret an American’s main points of speech and the other way round just because they have different discourse strategies. An Indonesian speaker uses topic-comment order of presentation in which the crucial points of the discourse occur later. At the beginning of



the conversation, the speaker tends to talk a lot about the background of the topic and keep the real or main purpose of the conversation until enough background speech has been done or until nearly the end of the conversation. For example, in a business meeting between an Indonesian and an American, the Indonesian opens his meeting by saying: 'Because we are going to open all of our new branch offices in big cities in Indonesia and up to now the economic condition in Indonesia still fluctuates; besides, we also have to collect enough capital before we open all those new branches, so I suggest that we delay the opening until the middle of the year'. Scollon, R. and Scollon, S.W. (1995) describes this kind of discourse pattern as follows:

because of Y (topic, background, or reasons) X (comment, main point / action suggested)

(Scollon et al., 1995, p.1)

On the contrary, the American would use a discourse strategy of starting his discussion by introducing the main point of his discussion directly so that the listeners or other speakers could react and he could find arguments to support. For example: 'I suggest that we delay the opening of all our new branch offices until the middle of the year. It is because I think, since we are going to open all of our new office branches in big cities in Indonesia, we have to collect enough capital before we open them. Besides, up to now the economic condition in Indonesia still fluctuates.' This discourse pattern can be described as follows:

X (comment, main point / action suggested) because of Y (topic, background or reasons)
--

(Scollon et al., 1995, p. 2)

The two examples above actually have the same main topic of discussion; that is, to delay opening new office branches until the middle of the year. However, the way of presenting the idea is different because of the different discourse strategies. This different discourse might cause the Indonesian to have the stereotype about the Americans as being too direct and rude; on the other hand, the American might have the stereotype about the Indonesians as inscrutable so that both of them might have a prejudice against each other.

Another situation below gives us further illustration of how the different discourse pattern of the Asians and the Americans causes misinterpretation and prejudice on each other. Mr. William Blake who has enjoyed his conversation with Mr. Sen is ready to part. Before he leaves, Mr. Blake says to Mr. Sen: "It has been nice to see you. I must invite you to come over to my house for dinner sometime later." Mr. Sen answers: "I would really appreciate it." However, after waiting for a few weeks, Mr. Sen begins to suspect Mr. Blake as being a liar and insincere. He starts to have a negative thought about Mr. Blake because Mr. Blake does not follow up his dinner invitation with a specific time and place. As an Asian who has the discourse pattern of mentioning the important point at the end of the conversation, Mr. Sen thinks that Mr. Blake is seriously making a dinner invitation, no matter whether the dinner is important for Mr. Sen or not. While for Mr. Blake, his dinner invitation is just one of the conventional ways in his culture of expressing his enjoyment and great time he has from having the

conversation, and the good impression he has toward Mr. Sen. Thus, the expression 'I must invite you to come over to my house for dinner sometime later' is just an expression signalling a farewell and not a real dinner invitation. In the case above, neither Mr. Sen nor Mr. Blake is wrong since each of them thinks, speaks and acts based on their cultural backgrounds. Thus, in order to avoid intercultural communication block, as listeners, we need to understand the discourse patterns / strategies of the speaker. These examples show us that actually language and culture are interrelated.

According to Bovève and Thill (2000), when a speaker sends a message, his intention is to communicate meaning. However, the meaning of the message depends on the listener's interpretation. In order to achieve understanding in the communication, the speaker and listener must share similar interpretation for words, gestures, tone of voice, and other symbols. In the example above, Mr. Sen and Mr. Blake do not share similar interpretation for the expression 'I must invite you to come over to my house for dinner sometime later'. Therefore, Mr. Blake's intended meaning or that which is in his mind as a speaker when he is formulating his message is not the same as how Mr. Sen interprets the meaning or that which is in his mind as a listener when he receives the message.

Moreover, based on Cooper's mentalistic theory (Cooper, 1973), an expression is meaningful if and only if it is associated in some manner with a certain mental item – an image, say, or a thought, or an idea" (p. 14). Thus, it can be concluded that the expression 'I must invite you to come over to my house for dinner sometime later' has different meaning since Mr. Sen does not have the same mental image or thought as Mr. Blake does about the meaning of the expression above. As a result, there is intercultural miscommunication between Mr. Sen and Mr. Blake and the impact is that it causes Mr. Sen's bad impression on Mr. Blake which actually does not need to happen.

Related to the above discourse pattern, is the functions of language which are different even in each society. In most Indonesian cultures, for example, greetings or other questions which sound like very personal questions only have the functions of maintaining good relationship with others. Therefore, questions such as 'Where are you going?' or 'How are you?' actually do not need a real answer since the speaker does not expect a true answer. To answer the later question, people can just say 'I'm fine' and he usually does not really expect the other person to give the real answer of how he really is. Besides, the speaker also does not expect other people to believe that he is literally 'fine'. When an Indonesian asks somebody by asking 'Where are you going?', it does not mean that he really wants to know where that person is going since it is only a way of greeting somebody whom he already knows. Therefore, people usually just give the minimum of actual information as the answer, for example, 'I just want to go there'. This culture of greeting by asking questions which sound like personal questions often does not get the aim; that is, to maintain good social relationship, instead, it can bring intercultural miscommunication if the listener does not have the same way of greeting. An American might feel that the speaker who asks 'Where are you going?' is very impolite since he thinks that the person wants to interfere with his business.

The next hindrance of intercultural communication is non-verbal communication which can refer to different concepts of time and space, and what is discussed below is the different concept of time. Cooper (1973) states that "there is a correlation between one limited aspect of language and some wider aspect of language, the whole battery of terms and analogies employed in talking about time" (1973, p. 121). Further, Cooper



explains that “concepts do differ” and “ways of talking differ radically from society to society” (p. 121). The different concept or perception of time can be seen in the case between an American and an Asian executives. When American executives do business transactions, they would use their time effeciently and focus on only one task for one scheduled period. Since time should be spent effectively, they would directly talk to the point in their communication. On the other hand, Asian executives perceive time as more flexible than the American executives so that the Asian executives do not have strict schedule. In the cultures of the Asian, making a foundation for the business relationship is more important than finishing their tasks on time. Thus, they would try to spend a lot of time getting to know each other well. According to philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant or a contemporary one, Strawson, “Men think in accordance with certain basic concepts or categories, including those of time, material object, and space” (Cooper, 1973, p.102). The example about the American and the Asian executives above is relevant to the philosophers’ idea in the sense that the American’s concept of time is that time should be counted as an element of their business success so that they should use their time effectively and should not talk about things unrelated to their topic of discussion. On the other hand, the Asian’s concept of time is that time is irrelevant to the business success as the element for business success is good relationship; therefore, they take socialization as the priority in doing their business with other people. As a result, when the Asian have to work together with the American, there might be misunderstanding concerning the use of time.

In other example, the different concept of time between an American and an Asian - for example an Indonesian - can be seen through their language, for example through the proverbs related to time. In Indonesian, we have the proverb ‘Biar lambat asal selamat’ or in Javanese ‘Alon-alon asal kelakon’ which reflects the concept of time in our culture, that actually we are not bound by time. This leads to the habit of being late for a given schedule. This proverb also gives the impression that we do not need to rush in doing something since we consider safety as the priority. On the other hand, the Americans also have the proverb ‘Time is money’ which actually tells us that the Americans consider time as precious as money so that they do not want to waste their time. The impact of these differences in the concept of time is that there might be intercultural conflict between the Asians and the Americans and it might create wrong perceptions about these two nations. The Asians might be perceived as lazy since they culturally prefer to have flexible time in everything they do. On the other hand, the Americans might be considered as rigid since they prefer to use their time effectively and efficiently. Hence, when the Asians and the Americans work together, there might be intercultural misunderstanding because the Asians might not come to work or meetings punctually. The Americans might suspect the Asians as reluctant to work though in fact, it might not be true and just a wrong stereotype. Thus, this example also shows us that language and culture are correlated and there is significant connection between vocabulary of a language and the concept (in this example, concept of time) of those employing it (Cooper, 1973, p. 103).

Furthermore, because of the concept of time urgency, people will always think of what they should do in the future as time progress rapidly. As what is stated by Scollon, R. and Scollon, S. (Scollon et al., 1995) that “behind the concept of time urgency is the idea that what lies ahead in the future is always better than what lies behind in the past; it is based solidly on the belief in progress” and this concept of time is called “Utopian concept of time” (p. 147). However, the Asian’s concept of time which is also called “Golden – Age concept of time” (p. 147) does not challenge people (the Asians) to

move forward hurriedly and it gives the impression that the Asians like to live only in the past. In this case, I would agree with the Utopian concept of time because although we learn a lot from the past experiences, we cannot just live in the past. We have to get new spirits to move forward and think about the future if we want to improve the bad things in the past.

Finally, from what has been discussed above, it can be concluded that some factors such as the use of vocabulary in a language, the different discourse patterns, the different language functions or the different concept of time in different cultural backgrounds can hinder intercultural communication. Besides, these factors can also cause false stereotype about other people or nation. Thus, to overcome the intercultural miscommunication, it is not enough if people only learn about one's language; instead they should also learn about his cultural background since human beings have culturally different conceptualization.

References

- Bov e, Courtland L. (2000). *Business Communication Today*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall International, Inc.
- Cooper, David E. (1973). *Philosophy and the Nature of Language*. London: Longman Group Ltd.
- Corder, S.P. (1973). *Introducing Applied Linguistics*. England: PenguinBooks Ltd.
- James, Joyce E. (1996). *The Language - Culture Connection*. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Leech, G. (1974). *Semantics*. England: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Lewis, Glen and Slade, Christina. (2000). *Critical Communication*. Canberra: Pearson Education Australia Pty Limited.
- Scollon, Ron and Scollon, Suzanne Wong (1995). *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*. Great Britain: Hartnolls Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall.